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ABSTRACT

Research conducted since the early 1970s has provided important insights into how written language develops and how teachers can best foster that growth. One of these promotes the holistic approach to language instruction--to nurture the emergent speller is to nurture the emergent reader, writer, speaker, listener, and thinker. Another important insight is that young children know much about print and can gain control over the conventions of print using the same experimental methods with which they learned to use oral language: hypothesizing, receiving immediate feedback, and practicing. Other research proposes a series of stages of early writing behaviors that may correspond to levels of awareness in a child. Children may evidence them singly or in any combination, move back and forth among them or skip them entirely. The teacher who is aware of these insights and encourages the young child to read by really reading and write by really writing, through an abundance of writing experiences, promotes risk-taking for both students and teachers. Children must be given reasons for writing--to entertain, inform, or label--and experiences that reward their efforts--making books, charts, and graphs, or keeping logs. As children attempt to build words to use in their writing, they develop spelling strategies. Teachers must observe the children and base their curriculum--including direct spelling instruction--on these observations rather than on workbooks and ditto sheets. (Examples of students' writing are included.) (LLZ)

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I LK RNBS: NURTURING THE EMERGENT SPELLER

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I LK RNBS: NURTURING THE EMERGENT SPELLER

Young children demonstrate some of their emerging knowledge of language by their spellings. Since the early seventies, much work has been done with the writing of pre-schoolers and primary grade children in an effort to understand how they gradually develop perceptual awareness and control over the arbitrary customs used in written English (Britton, 1970; Chomsky, 1971 & 1979; Clay, 1975; read, 1971; Beers, Beers and Grant, 1977; DeFord, 1980; Bissex, 1980; Harste, Burke and Woodward, 1981; Temple, 1982; Milz, 1982). Such studies are repleat with samples of children's freely written messages, letters, lists, lables, descriptions, rhymes, stories, sketches, and scribbles. This body of data has provided a number of important insights into how wirtten language develops and how we as teachers can best foster that growth (Temple, 1984).

Among other things, we have learned that; (a) young children know more about print than we thought possible, (b) children develop spelling strategies for words they have not been taught through a process of discovery and experimentation with print (Harste, Woodward and Burke, 1984), and (c) spelling develops best in concert with direct instruction and exploration of print through an abundance of writing events (Temple, 1984).

Spelling does not develop in a vacuum. To nurture the emergent speller is to nurture the emergent reader and writer,

speaker, listener and thinker. Therefore, any consideration of spelling must be viewed in relation to how growth in spelling supports and is supported by all facets of language learning.

Theoretical Framework

The fact that children know more about print than was originally assumed seems to be true for children as young as three years, for boys as well as girls, for children of all races and across all socio-economic conditions. Young children, ages three to six years of age (prior to formal instruction), know a great deal about print in their environment: e.g., Coca-Cola, McDonalds; Milk etc. They may also know such specifics as that print is different from pictures, that print is "read" from left to right, that letters make up words, that letters represent sounds, that words are surrounded by spaces, that print represents meaning, etc. What they know about print reflects what has been highlighted in their social environment (Harst, Burke and Woodward, 1984).

Further, it appears that this gradual awareness of and control over the conventions of print through experimentation parallels the process of oral language development (Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1979). That is, writing is not learned merely by copying and attending to the mechanics of print any more than oral language is learned solely through imitation and focusing on speech sounds. Rather, children actively engage in constructing their oral language through a process which involves hypothesizing about how language works, receiving feedback in the

form of responses to the intended meaning, and demonstrations of how to make meaning. Child language, which only approximates adult speech is accepted, encouraged and frequently praised. A child's oral language develops within a social context as it is used for real purposes (Halliday, 1973; Lee and Rubin, 1979). Children do not study "about language" in order to become full language users, they use language and thereby learn it.

Since the development of early writing parallels the development of speech, it too consists of hypothesizing-about how print works, hence discovering and experimenting with how print represents both meaning and the oral language. Children gradually develop control over the conventions of written English through active participation in constructing meaning for real purposes, receiving feedback, using demonstrations and being rewarded for approximations (Goodman, 1980; Cohen, 1981; and Cochrane, et al, 1984; Lindfors, 1985).

Finally, there appears to be a describable series of stages or levels of processing in which we may find a given child at any given point in time, but these do not correspond to the notion that there exists a sequential, hierarchical progression through which all children must pass (Clay, 1975; Newkirk, 1985). Language may be described in terms of a hierarchy of units: meaning is expressed in sentences, sentences can be broken down into phrases, phrases into words and words into sounds. But, even from single word utterances children are cognitively engaged in all these levels.. For example, the toddler who lifts her arms emploringly at her Daddy's knee and repeats, "Up! Up!" is clearly making a one word, imperative, active voice sentence, the

intended meaning of which is, (I want you to) "Pick me up!" Clearly this very effective communication demonstrates beginning awareness of and control over the conventions of intonation, pragmatics, phonology, snytax and semantic content. Real language used to get real needs met must involve all levels of the heirarchy.

Similarly, good readers from the beginning work at all levels in the hierarchy to make meaning from written language. The "reading" of a known rhyme engages the kindergarten child in utilizing intonation, grapho - phonics, syntax and semantic processing. The fact that poor readers tend to focus on words and sounds rather than on processing meaning, and may not be incorporating the features by which letters and words are distinguished, occurs when instruction interfers in the natural process. (DeFord, 1979). Such instruction typically consists of a sequence of "skills" at what is considered to be the lowest level in the hierarchy (letters and sounds) and causes some children to decide that the purpose of reading is to make words rather than meaning (Clay, 1975). In early writing, where instruction has not yet violated the natural processes necessary for children to engage in discovering the rules by which written language works, (Ferriero, 1980), children must engage in all levels of the language hierarchy as they attempt to build letters into words, words into phrases, phrases into sentences and sentences into whole texts (Clay, 1975) and they must actively engage in this composing process for their own purposes (Lindfors, 1985).

Observable Stages in Early Writing

While there is no inflexible sequence of development in children's growing control over the conventions of print, there are types of early writing behavior which may correspond to levels of awareness in each child. Children may evidence only one aspect of early writing, or any combination. They may move back and forth among types, or they may by-pass some possible types of attempted writing altogether.

According to Hipple (1985):

> Among the writers in my class, there appeared the following statges. Nonwriting. Some students were clearly content to draw their stories with no accompanying text. Scribbling. Some writers attempted to emulate the line, shape, and direction of traditional writing; such work is called "scribbling." Random lettering. The printing of random letters (e.g., "Ydforu") was common among the kindergartners. Labeling and listing. Many writers reeproduced numerals, proper names, or other words either from memory or from print sources they had seen. The names might appear singly or be repeated in lists which lacked any narrative content. Invented spellings. Some writers demonstrated beginning phonemic segmentation skills by writing words with some consonant sounds spelled out. One child accompanied a drawing of birds with the word "BRDZ." "HRT" was a common invented spelling for "heart." As the year progressed, vowels began to appear in the invented spelling; "MI" for "my." Transitional spelling. A middle stage that consisted of a mix of conventional spelling and invented spelling was evident in a few children especially among those who were working at a high level of emergent reading. PP 258-259.

Any kindergarten or primary grade teacher who encourages children to risk producing meaingful print before they can "really write" has surely encountered all the types of writing described above.

The Nurturing Classroom

The principle that children learn to read by really reading and to write by really writing, just as they learned to talk by

really talking holds great promise for helping children become truelly literate (Edelsky, 1984). Children develop their internal models of written language from natural, purposeful encounters with print. Instructional activities which violate the natural processes stiffle growth while instrucitonal activities that promtoe risk-taking, accept approximations and focus on making meaning nuture the emergent writer (Wilson, 1981). This requires teachers to be risk-takers, too. They have to give up reliance on a fixed curriculum dominated by basal readers, workbooks, ditto sheets, and the false security of a list of sequential isolated skills. They have to observe children, learning how to promote language growth through responding to what children are trying to do with print (Smith, F. 1973; Goodman, Y., 1985; Lindfors, 1985).

Several primary grade teachers in the Middle Tennessee area are currently learning to take such risks. They have already discovered astounding things about their children's abilities to write and they have rediscovered their love for teaching.

Such teachers invite children to write on a daily basis. From the first day children "write" about their "reading", and what has been read to them. They "read" in order to extend or pattern their writing. They write to ask for something, to entertain, to label, to explain, to inform, and to share thoughts and feelings. Children engage in making books, writing letters, taking surveys, keeping logs, making charts and graphs, and numerous other real writing events. Children learn to think of themselves as authors. Teachers lead children through the

processes of revising for content and editing for simple mechanics(Graves, 19830).

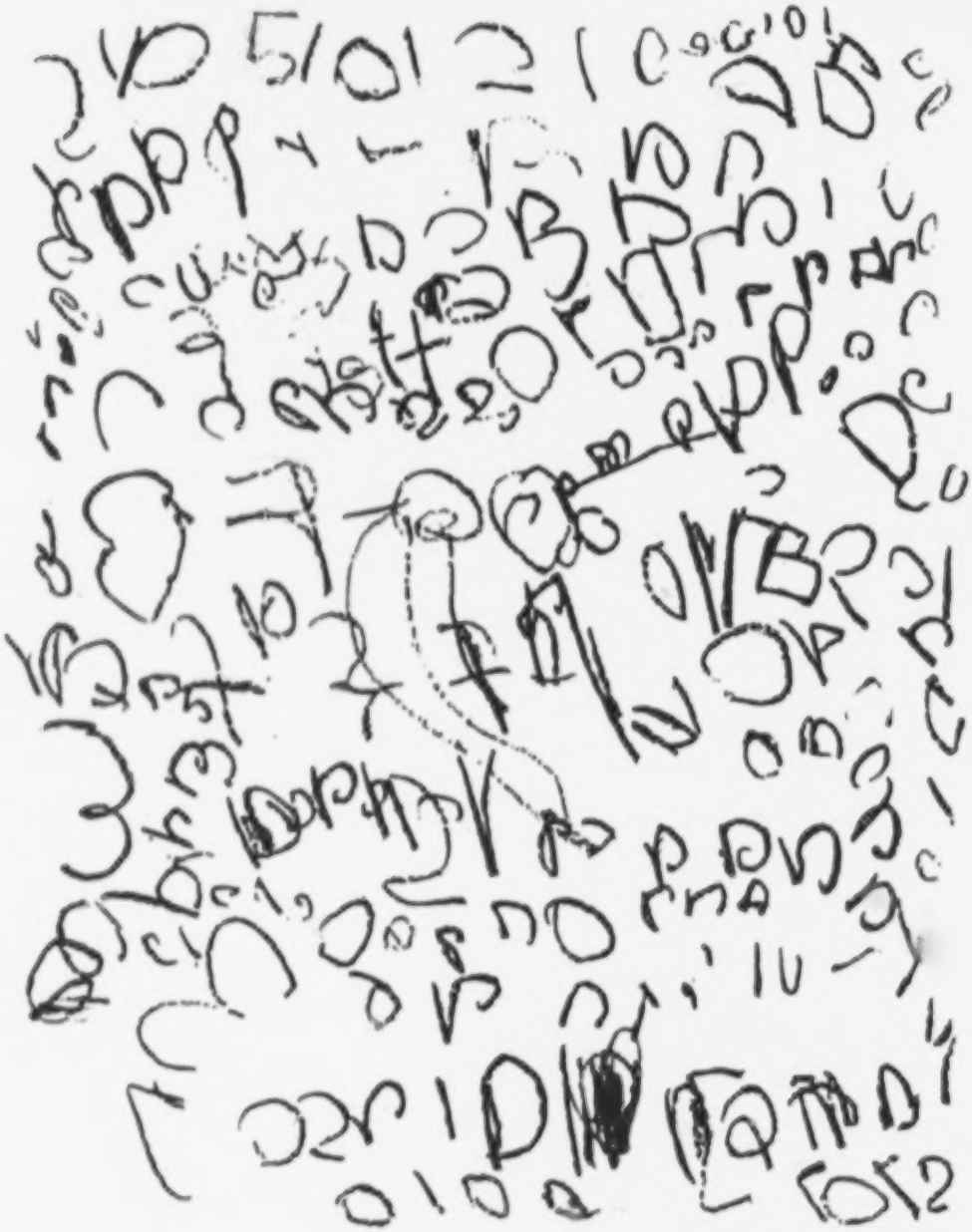
The following samples of young children's actual attempts at figuring out how print works are perhaps more illustrative of the results of such classrooms than any further academic description. These examples come from local kindergarten and first grade classrooms and represent the first few attempts at free writing any of these children have ever made (in school).

Figure One

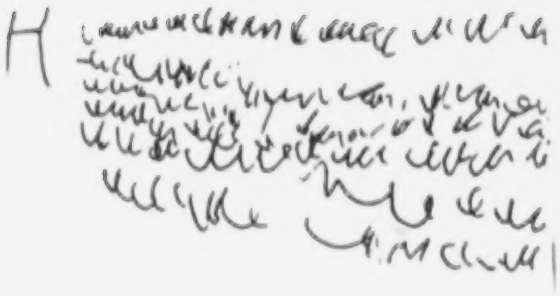
1a. Children write about home.

At first, Amy was afraid and said she couldn't write. Her very first try, which she "read" right to left, was offered to her teacher with the follow apology. "I didn't do it so good."

1b. However, after only a month in kindergarten, Amy was a much greater risk taker. In fact, she now produces "whole stories". She fills up an entire page with letter-like shapes which she reads left to right.

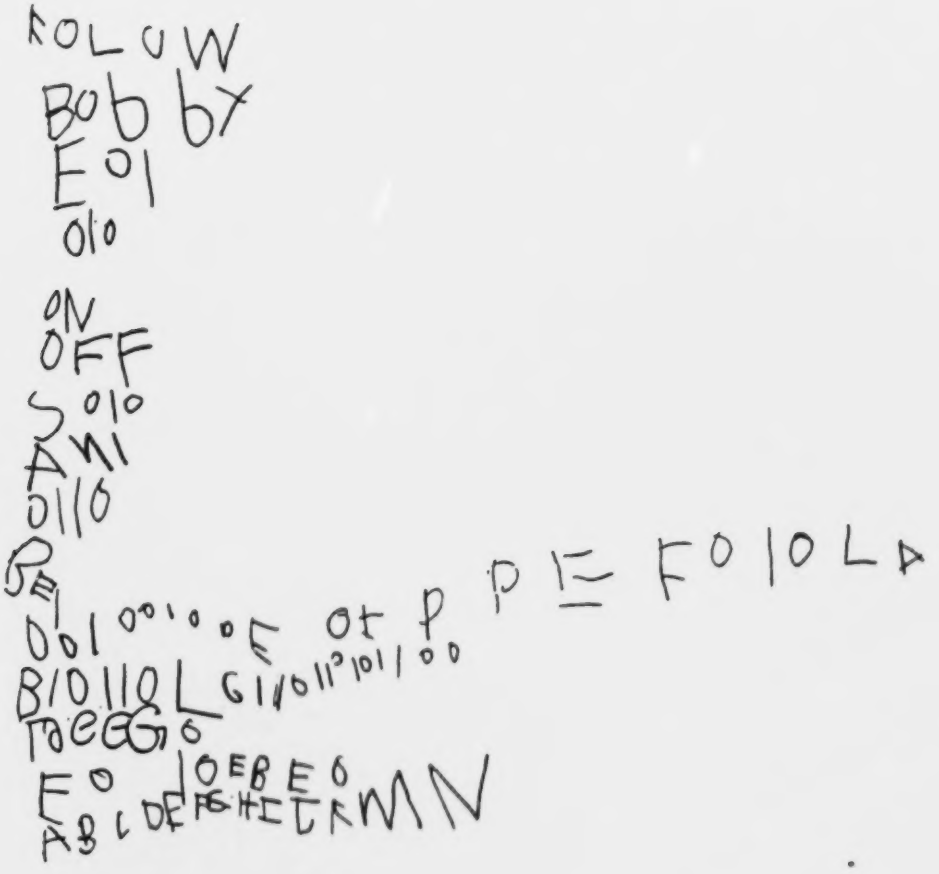


1c. Heather uses cursive for her letter writing.



2. Children write lists.

They write lists of favorite things, of people, of events, of items to remember, etc. This is Bobby's list of "All the words I know".

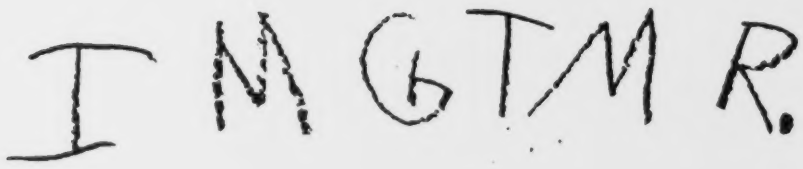


3. They write lables.

Lables are produces for objects, as well as for people. Sometimes the real is combined with the word(s). In this sample Ray began his word <u>chairs</u> with a sketch of a chair.

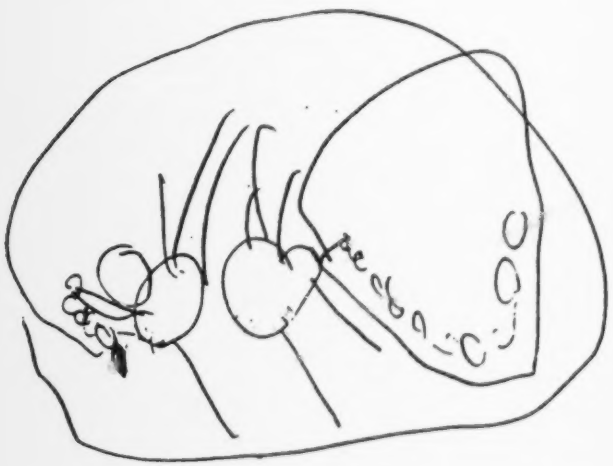
4. They write about what they want to do when they grow up.

During "Paper Talk" time Angela wrote to her friend, "I'm Getting Married." Actually, Angela's mother was getting married and the up coming event was apparently on her mind.

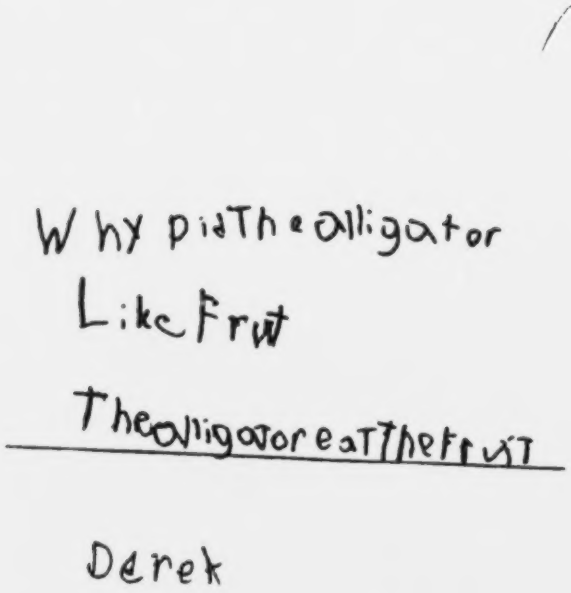


5a. They write in their journals.

The children write about how they feel, what interests them about what they read, about events of the day, etc. The following journal entry, from a kindergarten child, cites an occurance observed on the way to school. "Spencer got stung on the ear." The picture and the letter-like shapes, read from left to right, are reminiscent of a cartoon with caption.

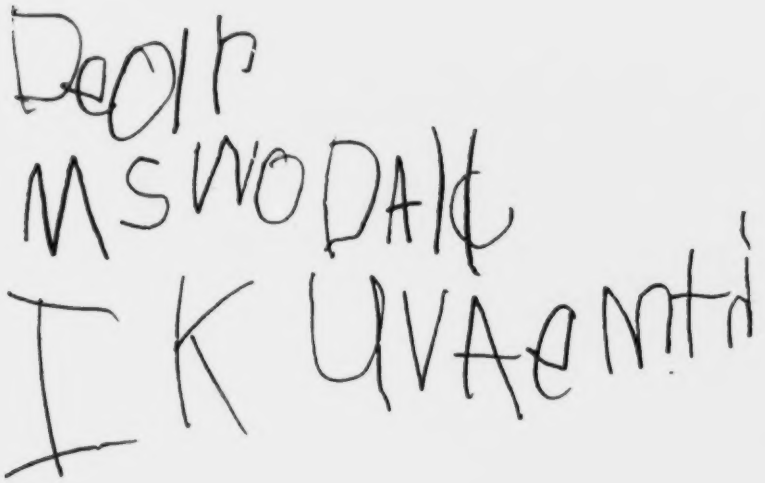


5b. Derek asks questions with print. Note that alligator is spelled correctly, but directionality with the small letter d is still a problem.

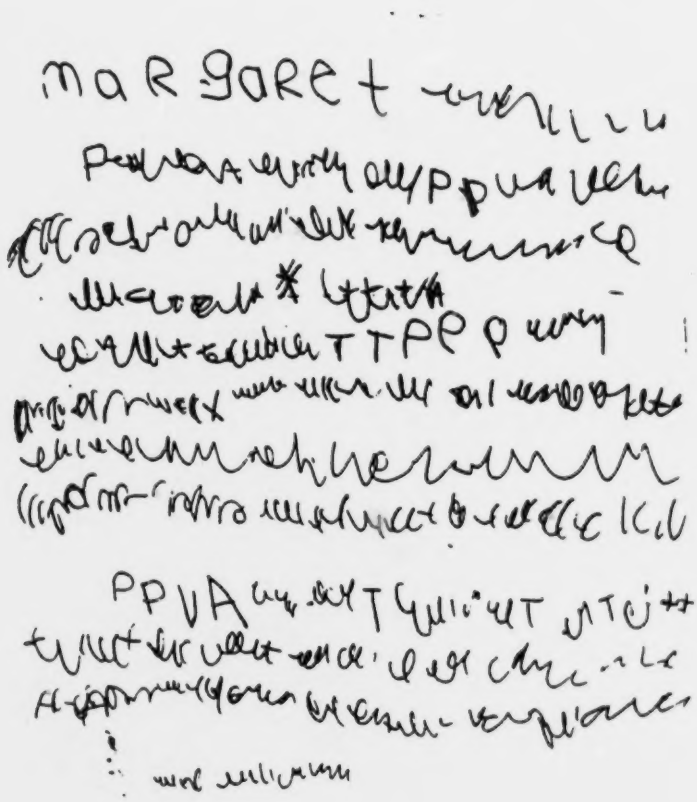


6a. They write notes and letters to the teacher.

This is Bill's first note to his teacher. "Dear Ms. Wadddell, I like you very much." The beginnings of letter form with salutation are evident in this piece of text.

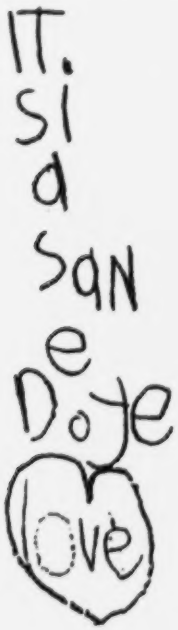


6b. Alice moves back and forth between scribbles and real letters and word like form. She can "read" her letter in its entirety.



7. They write about their observations.

They write about objects, events, people and conditions they observe in their worlds. Kristine wrote in her journal, "It is a sunny day".



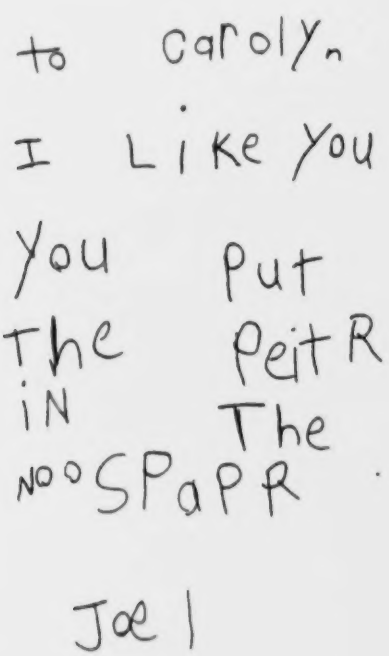
8. They write letters to others.

They write letters to classmates for the classroom post office. They write letters to parents.

Dear mom,
Weo You Do
fos it me!

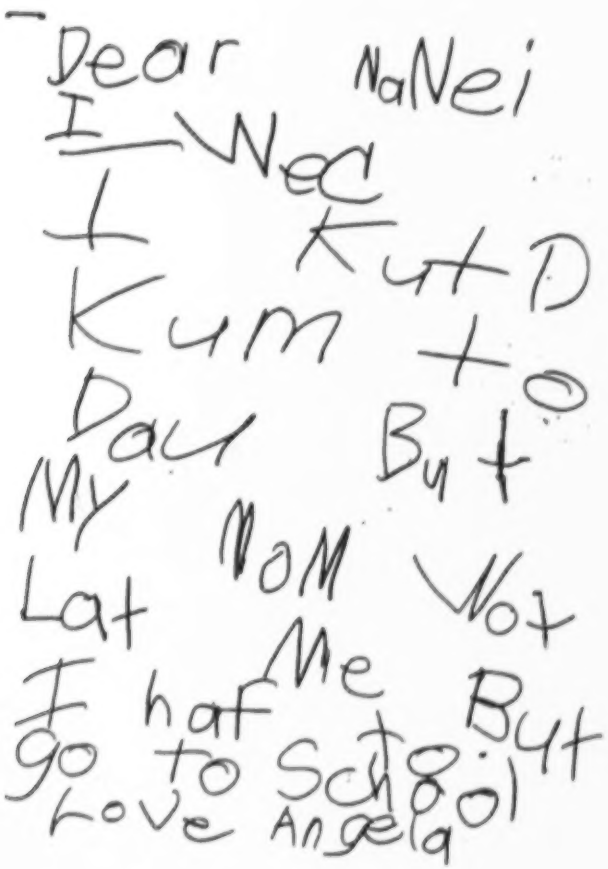
9. They write to visitors.

When the education writer from the local newspaper visited Ms. Waddell's kindergarten classroom to see for herself children that young reading and writing, she told the children that she was a writer. One of the children replied, "We're all writers here too." She took pictures of the children in action and one of the children wrote her the following note. "To Carolyn, I like you. Put the picture in the newspaper. Joel."

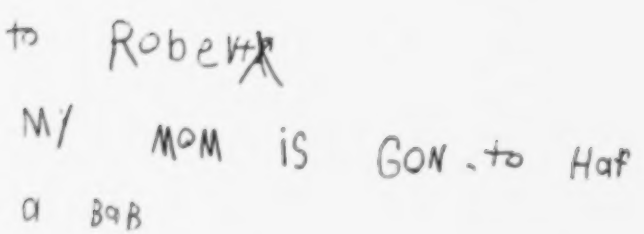


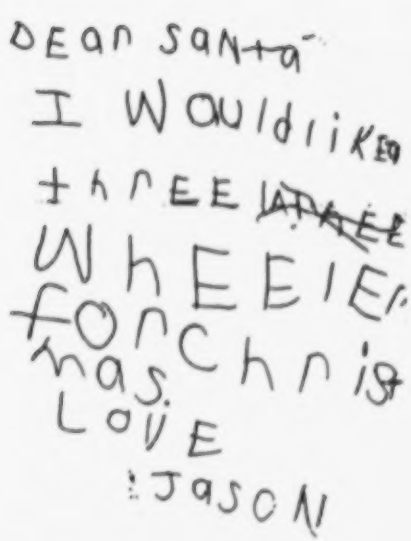
10a. They write to friends in other classes.

"Dear Naomi, I wanted to come today but my mom wouldn't let me. But I have to go to school. Love, Angela"



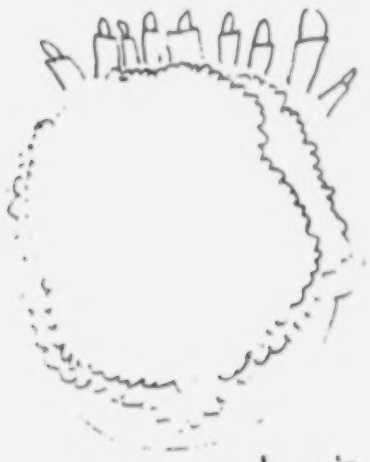
10b. Sometimes they self-correct without help from a teacher.





11. They write about events in the classroom.

This piece of writing followed a birthday celebration.

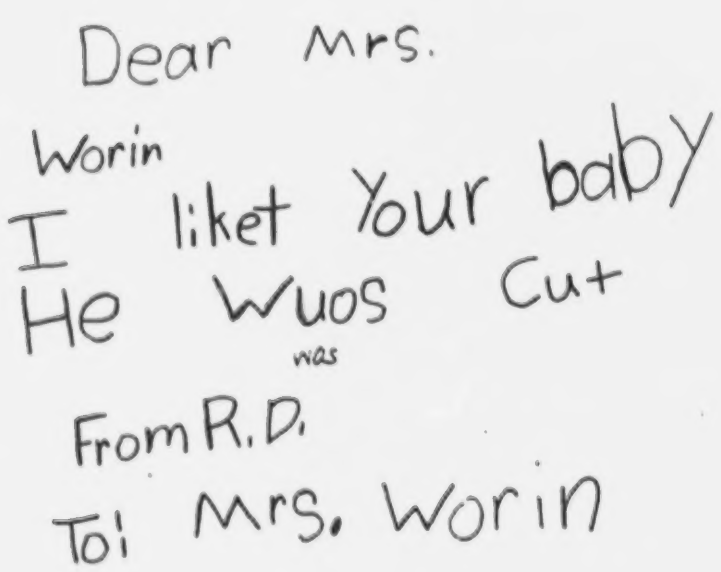


This is Benjamin

BA DA CAKD

12. They write to other teachers in the school.

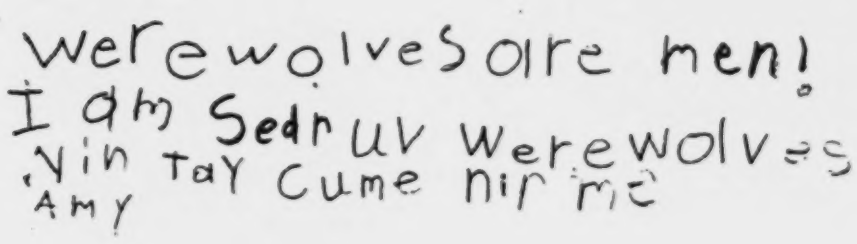
When Ms. Warren brought her new baby to school for the children to see, R.D. wrote her this message.



13. They write about class discussions.

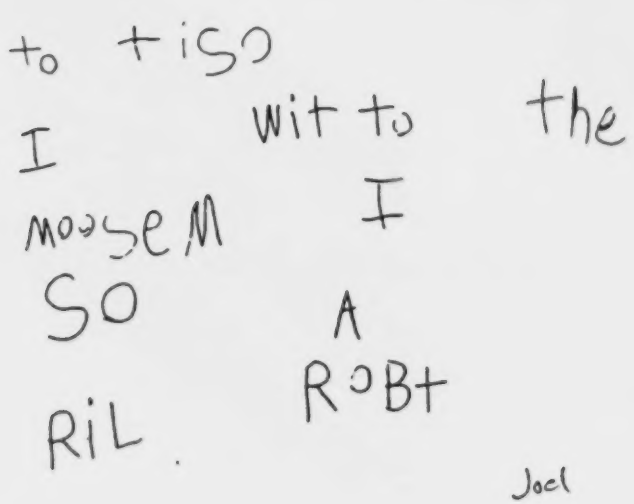
Such discussions may arise out of events at school, television programs, stories read to the children, objects the children examined, questions they have about the world, etc. After a television movie about werewolves and the class discussion the next day, Amy wrote:

"Werewolves are mean". I am scared of werewolves when they come near me." ("I am mean." is written in the bubble). Note that werewolves is spelled correctly.



14. They write about field trips.

"To Lisa, I went to the museum. I saw a real robot. Joel."



15. They write about films they see in the classroom.

After viewing a film on handicapped children, Becky wrote the following recap of the story. (The numbers were her idea.) "Julie"

Julie is handicapped and she has no arms. Julie is very special. Julie can cook. Julie can swim very well. Julie can do many (things). I like her. Julie is my friend. She can dress herself. The end. By Becky.

Julie

1.Julie is HANDKAP
2AN SE HASNO RMS
3Julie IS VARE SPESL
~~4~~Julie KAN KUK
5Julie KAN SWEM
6VERewel
7Julie KAN DOOMENE
8IJIN HR
9Julie es: MI FREN
10SEKAN DRECHR 2eLF.
THe
EHNd
Bi. Becky

16. They write and illustrate their own stories.

Then was a big ship on the See and ther was a big storm and it nock it ovr the ship Wint under wotr and cild a hobunch af peple,
Love, Darren.

"There was a big ship on the sea and there was a big storm and it knocked it over. The ship went under water and killed a whole bunch of people. Love, Darren."

As children struggle with building words they want use, spelling strategies develop. As they rewrite, spelling instruction is a natural consequence of getting some of the work ready for "publication". Publication can be making books for the classroom or the school library, sending a letter to Santa, presenting the results of a poll to the principal, making a big birthday card for the school custodian, and many other projects. Weekly spelling words can come from the children's problem words in reading and writing encounters (Henderson, 1984). Direct instruction in the features of written words and spelling patterns can be accomplished by highlighting elements in the real literature and written texts which children are exploring. Learning activities can be devised that foster the development of spelling strategies in children (Temple, 1984). Unless children engage in real writing and real reading, they may not have opportunities to develop their full language abilities.

Rosie was once such a non-writer. She entered Ms. Waddell's kindergarten classroom in March of 1985 after having been in a traditional sound-letter curriculum for the first six months of school. Suddenly she found herself among readers and writers. Rosie would not write because she "couldn't do it right ". Ms. Waddell assumed that Rosie could and would read and write. After two weeks of watching the other children and being steadily encouraged by her teacher, Rosie proudly produced "I LK RNBS" carefully printed at the top of a page of crayoned rainbows. Ms. Waddell wrote back, "So do I", and one more child was on her way.

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